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History of the First Presbyterian Church,

SOUTH BERGEN, N. J.,

FROM ITS ORGANIZATION TO MARCH 6, 1864.

A SERMON,

Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church,

BERGEN, N. J.,

SABBATH, MARCH 6, 1864,

BY

EDWARD W. FRENCH,

PASTOR.

New-York :

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1864.



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Divine Providence and Grace.

"The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."
Ps. cxxvi: 3.

Toward the close of the summer of 1856, a few Christian men and women residing in South Bergen, Hudson Co., N. J., decided to form there a Presbyterian Church. Notice was publicly given of arrangements for Divine Worship in the building known as Miss Carpenter's Seminary, on Hudson avenue. The rent was one dollar, a Sabbath. The first service was held on the Sabbath, Sept. 21, 1856. Rev. James B. Bonar, (now Pastor of the American Church, Montreal,) preached, in the morning and evening, to a congregation of about eighty persons. On that day, also, a Sabbath-school was formed, and Mr. John G. Parker was, by acclamation, made Superintendent. There were seven Teachers—viz.: Rev. James G. Craighead, Messrs. John G. Parker, Orrin H. Crosby, Alexander Bonnell, Mrs. Henry Dusenbery, and Misses Mary E. Smith and Emma L. Crosby—and sixteen scholars. On the next Sabbath there were twelve Teachers and thirty-nine Scholars; and on Nov. 9, 1856, there were one hundred and forty-one Scholars.

The first meeting for Conference and Prayer was held on Wednesday evening, Sept. 24, 1856, and attended by twelve persons. There has been but one omission of the Prayer-meeting on that evening of the week during our history thus far. Edward W. French began to preach, as Stated Supply, on the next Sabbath, Sept. 28, 1856.

On the 13th day of October, 1856, Messrs. John G. Parker and Orrin H. Crosby made regular application to the Third Presbytery of New York to form a Presbyterian Church in South Bergen, N. J. The action of the Presbytery was favorable. The congregation met on the evening of Oct. 24, 1856, when a Board of seven Trustees was elected; and twenty-four persons, all but one bringing certificates of dismission, were constituted, by a Committee of the above-named Presbytery, into a church, under the title of "The First Presbyterian Church of Bergen." Messrs. John G. Parker and Orrin H. Crosby were elected as Ruling Elders; and Messrs. Robert D. Wynkoop and Richard H. Westervelt, as Deacons.

A call for the Pastoral services of Edward W. French was made out Nov. 19, 1856; and on the 15th Jan., 1857, he was ordained and installed as Pastor, by a Committee from the Third Presbytery of New York. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered, for the first time, to the Church on the morning of the first day and Sabbath of February, 1857, when twenty-two persons, all but one by certificate, were received into fellowship. The cata-

logue then numbered forty-six. The first observance of the Monthly Concert was on Monday, Feb. 2, 1857. The collection was \$6 78.

The Church was now prepared for its work; but many and real difficulties impeded the way. The congregation was small. Its members knew of each other little more than the name. (This fact, which should be remembered, will account for any delay and mistake at that time.) There had never been a Presbyterian Church in Bergen, and very few of the old residents could be expected to join the new undertaking. Therefore the responsibility, with the expense and toil, would devolve upon a few. Many misapprehensions in the public mind were to be removed; and in the Church itself, the opinions and tastes of differently trained individuals were to be harmonized. On the other hand, there were decided encouragements. The Church owed its existence to an endeavor to meet the religious needs of the community. This point was clear, and almost without exception admitted. Therefore, its members held their purpose with conscientious firmness. There was a remarkable prevalence of true kindness and courtesy in the congregation, which greatly aided the steady increase of worshipers. On Sabbath, Oct. 5, 1856, there were two hundred listeners to the Word. The building, in which they met, was popularly known as the "School-house." It became too small, even after the audience-room had been enlarged in March, 1857, so as to seat fifty hearers more.

Thus was suggested and warranted the idea of erecting a Church edifice, as there was no public hall which could be temporarily used. But, as the population was rapidly increasing, regard must be had to a prospective need, and also to convenience and attractiveness. With the resources, which the Church could then command or expect, this was a problem indeed. It was hard to decide, which would be the more disastrous—too large, or too small, outlay. It was like deciding between surfeit and hunger. The failure in business, or removal, or death, of even one man, would cripple, if it did not destroy, the enterprise.

What need, then, of zeal tempered by prudence, of liberality, of experience, and faith in God! No one can tell how much there was of inquiry and thought, of deliberation and prayer. There was hesitation; but it sprung from caution, not from indecision. If the feet of progress halted, they took not a step backward. The location of the Church-edifice was fixed. Four lots, one hundred feet front, were paid for, and the contracts for building were made. The corner-stone of the edifice, in which we are now assembled, was laid Sept. 16, 1857, in less than a year after the organization of the Church. But the Autumn and Winter of 1857-8 are memorable for a financial panic and reverse. The foundation of business was shaken. It was deemed advisable, therefore, to suspend the work of building during the Winter. Those were days of suspense, depression,

overturning. Cheerfulness and confidence were virtues of unwonted worth. But the heart of the Church did not droop: and when the Spring of 1858 appeared, the walls of Zion's earthly temple arose. It was a solace and incentive, through the heats and toils of city and household, to see at last the spire set as a crown upon the goodly work; and men started in delight from their homes, at the first melodious peal of the bell, as it had been the chimes of their wedding-morn. All felt the need of patience to regulate the fervor of desire to enter and enjoy the sacred habitation.

But there was sadness in the valedictory hymns, which we sung in the "School-house" on Sabbath evening, Oct. 24, 1858; for we were to hear the Word preached there no more. We remembered the scene, just two years before—the solemn constituting of another empire in the militant Kingdom of the Messiah. Since then, how much we had done, seen, and enjoyed, within those humble and beloved walls! There, our freedom from conventional restraint and our sweetness of fellowship had become proverbial. There, two of our number had plighted their faith in holy wedlock. (Mr. Cornelius Mandeville and Miss Mary Jane Wilson). There, we had wrestled in prayer with the Covenant Angel, and had heard the sob of penitence and the story of pardon and faith. There, in our own sight, the sapless stem of Christian profession had grown green with the life of Christ. And there, eleven times, we had

partaken together of the consecrated bread and wine. All could see that new duties and perils would attend the removal of our religious centre and home. But, did we not hear a voice—even that of God, the God of Moses—saying, “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.”

Four days afterward, Oct. 28, 1858, this building was publicly dedicated to the worship of the Triune God. Since that time, we have worshiped here, without the loss of a single Sabbath.

It will always stand as a proof of the sagacity of our Trustees, that they refused, because of health and economy, to use the basement of the Church for religious services. But, as this decision left us without a place for social worship in the new edifice, the weekly meetings for prayer were continued in the “School-house” until the warm weather of 1859, when they were transferred to the Church edifice itself, where the Sabbath-school had been held from the time of the dedication.

And it is no meagre description, or praise, of these institutions, to say, that they did not languish because of these migrations, separations, and inconveniences. Meanwhile, the same watchfulness and wisdom which had thus far managed the temporalities of the Church, were busy with plan and execution. The same regard to present comfort and future necessity, as had superintended the erection of the main building, (at a cost of about twenty thousand

dollars), was exercised in its addition—the Session-House (at an additional cost of over \$5,500)—in itself a smaller Temple—a Chapel—with ample and inviting room, in its two stories, for the Sabbath-school, Lecture, Prayer-meeting, Social Reunion, Concert, or Festival. The first service, held in it, was a Prayer-meeting, conducted by Mr. Joseph H. Merwin, on Wednesday evening, January 4, 1860.

The supplement to the first work made it complete; so that, as a whole, it wins admiration from those who prize simplicity and appropriateness. It has been designedly left without the rite of consecration, in order to provide a befitting place for the secular enterprises of the Church; and thus to aid in maintaining inviolate the sanctity of the main edifice. The Trustees, with wisdom and foresight, saw the ultimate necessity of additional ground, on which to erect convenient sheds, and, should Providence favor them, a Parsonage, at some future time. They purchased, therefore, four other lots adjoining, making an entire front of 200 feet.

When the Church had thus secured all the appliances for vigorous growth, you became witnesses of the thoroughness of its external improvements. The neat sheds, the turfy embankment, the solid pavement, and the iron fence, betoken both love for Zion and wise liberality.

What would the few have said, who pondered and prayed in private parlors, only so brief a time before,

if they had known that the total cost of the Church-property would be, as we now know it is, \$31,-290 67!

It would not have been strange, if experience of disaster, or narrowness of income, had counselled essential retrenchment of plan. But it has been characteristic of this congregation, that this heavy burden has been borne without timidity or complaint. Our Ladies, at the outset, assumed and carried their full proportion of it. Not only have they practised frugality at home, but, by concerted and judicious efforts in the Sewing Circle, the Winter Fair, the Summer Entertainment, have made a free-will offering to the treasury of the church of \$2,298 22. In addition, they have abundantly proved their interest in the cause of benevolence and patriotism. Their hard-earned hundreds have been sent, with glad promptness, to Soldiers, Theological students, and Home Missionaries, to a total of \$850 50. Thus, this Church and Christ's cause have received, from the Ladies of the congregation, the noble sum of \$3,148 72. Any sketch of this Church would be sadly incomplete, which did not place in honorable prominence, the steadfast sympathy and effective co-operation of its wives, daughters, and sisters.

There is another class, whose meed of praise, to this day unbestowed publicly, befits this occasion. From the organization of the Church to the present time, all the successive Boards of Trustees have com-

prised only nineteen different men.* Upon them have fallen labor and responsibility, which few of us know, and for which special talents and training are requisite. Not one of them is a man of leisure. Each one is an industrious worker in some vocation, demanding all his time and strength. Yet, how large is the aggregate of hours which, through the lapse of years, they have cheerfully taken from needed rest and pleasant homes, in behalf of the pecuniary affairs of the Church! We enjoy the fruit of plans which they devised and executed; of funds which they raised or advanced, and of their healthful zeal and economical vigilance. By their management, every legal obligation of the Church has been promptly and fully met, and its credit not even once endangered. So smoothly have their measures progressed, that it is not easy for us to realize how much anxiety, prudence, trustfulness, and pains-taking toil they cost. Without such men, this Christian enterprise, which is now our delight and honor, must have ignobly perished, or have taken a place far below the true needs of this community. While this Temple stands, it will be a noble monument of the fidelity, wisdom, and generosity of the Trustees.

Nor have they had merely the sympathy of the

* Messrs. Thos. Andrews, John B. Barker, E. Bliss, Jr., Alexander Bonnell, A. L. Cadmus, M. D., Jas. G. Chalmers, P. J. Claassen, Jas. G. Craighead, Sam'l E. Darling, Henry Dusenbery, R. W. R. Freeman, Jas. C. McBirney, Joseph H. Merwin, John R. Montgomery, John G. Parker, John Raymond, Walter Storm, Bernard Vetterlein, George L. Wood.

congregation, but the timely loan, or gift, or counsel. Others have lessened expense by abatement of recompense for service in the choir, or by service there, without thought of reward. And many scores have not forgotten to bear, in secret prayer and in fervent charity, the burdens of their brethren in the Board of Trustees.

Turn now to the effect of this united endeavor upon the figures of our debt! It has been to them as southward motion to an iceberg, whose pinnacles and pillars, one by one, tumble harmlessly into the sea, leaving a fragment to be softened by winds and worn by waves, until it disappears forever. Thus has it been with the chilling, dangerous mass of debt. Payment has followed payment, until, three weeks ago, the fragment remaining was \$8,400.

To-day—and let the good news fly far and wide, by press, epistle, and conversation—to-day, the lips of truth can declare, that this balance is paid; and that now *our entire Church-property is unencumbered by the debt of a dime*. The day has indeed come, for which the eager eyes of love have watched, and the unselfish heart of love has prayed. Look at this pulpit, these pews, these columns, supporting the roof that prolongs each note of praise; remember the Session-House, pressing close to the Sanctuary, as if to borrow sanction; and then bid your glad heart say: Men have no claim here; Lord, these are all Thine own!

This last endeavor is memorable, not only for its

success, but for its character. Consider some of its features. There was no public gathering to canvass the question. Each one contributed privately, in the home, or place of business. There was no factitious rivalry, no sympathetic glow—nothing but the motive of delightful duty.

Nearly all in the congregation contributed. There was no lordly bequest, or single gift, that left a few easy hundreds; but a spontaneous, simultaneous, harmonious rallying of the people. It was done promptly; virtually, in six days; actually, in eleven. The Latin proverb is: "He gives twice who gives quickly." It was done gladly. To say there were no murmurs or frowns would be a disparagement, for there were numerous and thankful acknowledgments of the privilege. And bountifully, too. God had prepared the hearts of the people. They expected to give; had studied how much they could give—gave with both hands, and some doubled, and one even more than doubled, the first donation. And here and there with sacrifice. Upon more than one brow, anxious calculation was seen identifying the figures written with severer labors and self-denial.

And it may be stated, in general terms, that the entire debt and current expenses of the Church, throughout our whole history (to the amount of about \$3,000 per annum, including interest on mortgages), have been provided for *among ourselves*. We have tilled our own territory, and "God has given the increase." No one is poorer; every one is happier;

and "the smell" of this voluntary offering "is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed." Thus the debt was paid. Now, who paid it? Who have a right to participate in these great rejoicings? Those who were truly unable, yet desirous, to give. There are a few such. They are dear to the heart of the Church; they have given her the thrice-beaten gold of their influence and prayers, and to-day she clasps their hand and accepts their greeting. In like manner, she also welcomes those who gave small sums, because they could give no more. God does not use the arithmetic of men. With Him the mite may be more than the million. There are others—members of the congregation, whom, we trust, Divine Grace will yet give to us in Christian fellowship—who gave with intelligent convictions and generous alacrity. Then, too, those whose faces were strange to us a few months ago, but already looked-for and honored. Their offerings were enhanced in value by the quick sympathy and real heartiness which accompanied them. Finally, the givers of the larger amounts; how magnanimously they did their part! It was not the first or second time. They needed no pressure of appeal, and no exhibition of others' signatures. Their action was beautiful, because voluntary and conscientious.

These—all the individuals of these classes—have nobly done this noble work. It is a requital, that their children, with honest pride, will direct the eyes of another generation to their parents' work—the

magnificent legacy of an independent, evangelical Church.

Furthermore, it is written : "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth. The liberal soul shall be made fat." Thus, though so soon, some of our recent givers have found it. One person, after contributing, was enriched in a most unexpected manner. Another found his gift replaced from a quarter, which he had long deemed hopeless. And a third, who wrote his liberal amount with trembling, lest desire had exceeded ability, addressed himself with heightened diligence to business, in simple trust in God ; and before the next Sabbath, his loan to the Lord had made itself ten-fold. These are not anomalies. This is God's way. He can trust such men with money. "They shall prosper that love Jerusalem." But find one, who closes his heart to the needs of the Church, who thinks to thrive by hoarding or by selfish gratification, and you have found one, who has no true life, and whom no one loves. "There is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."

It is meet, on this eventful and joyous day, that ushers us into a new epoch as a Church, to rehearse the "great things which the Lord hath done for us" in our temporal affairs. It is "His right hand and holy arm which have gotten Him the victory." We disclaim any honor. We lay it to-day, with reverent hand, at the feet of Jehovah of Hosts. The honor, which we do crave, is His acceptance of our fervent and united praise.

Not less luminous with Divine favor is our spiritual history. Bestow upon it a glance! Far from schism, there has been no faction to separate and weaken us. The "grievous wolves" of heresy have not been permitted to rend the flock. "The very God of Peace" has tarried with us. Our growth has not been by large and sudden accessions, but by additions of a few on nearly all our Sacramental Sabbaths. There are now one hundred and four families represented in the congregation: and the number upon the Church-roll, including the dismissed and deceased, is two hundred and fifty-two.

We are often cheered by the assurances of undiminished affection, which are sent back to us by those removed to other homes by the Providence of God. The Wednesday evening meeting for prayer—just one month older than the Church itself—runs like a line of light through the seven and one-third years of our history. The Sabbath-school is a bulwark and decoration of the Church, with its forty Teachers, its ample library, its attractive room, doing a silent but potent work in training the hearts of two hundred and fifty scholars in the knowledge of Christ.

Your Ruling Elders have proved themselves "true yoke-fellows" of the Pastor and "ensamples to the flock." We have seen vice reclaimed, mere morality deepened into piety, usefulness taking a wider, higher range, and Christian profession bearing that fruit, which proves discipleship and glorifies the Father. We have gazed upon the changed counte-

nances of Brethren and Sisters, while thinking, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth!" We cherish their memory, for it is that of the just.

Nor has the channel of Christian benevolence been suffered to bear a scanty stream. This fact is in part an explanation of Divine aid in our temporal engagements. We have kept ourselves, by stated contributions, in sympathy with the main enterprises of Protestant Christianity. Each year has shown a marked increase of giving, not due so much to large and special gifts, as to the Holy Spirit's cultivation, in the most of us, of the celestial grace of liberality. The Treasurer's account shows a total given to Christ, for benevolent objects abroad, of \$2,361 45. But, how small a portion of the real achievements of a Church can facts and figures show! Where is the language that can fitly describe the changes wrought in human characters by the influence, so manifold and constant of a Church, whose Head and Glory are Christ! What a difference it makes, in the course of a few years, in the lives and destiny of a multitude of souls! Much more of good might have been done, and of Grace enjoyed; but this confession only heightens our gladness in the "great things" which "the Lord hath done for us" spiritually. Let us, Beloved, humbly own them in conversation, song and prayer; and best of all, in the life of faith, for that is the perfection of earthly praise.

To-day—this never-to-be-forgotten sixth of March,

1864—let him, who is your happy “servant for Jesus’ sake,” congratulate the fifteen that remain with us, of the first members of the Church—and among them, that hale and genial old man, the lover of little children, the laborious Trustee, the faithful Elder, whom we have not known to despond or to stand still. There are others equally deserving the title—founders of this Church—though their names are not registered with the first. As they behold the fruition of their hopes—the Church of their love upon an honorable and permanent foundation—let them recall the Scripture: “There shall be a handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains, the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon.” Others still, at later periods, identified with us, have been foremost in “every good word and work,” and this is the day of their reward and rejoicing.

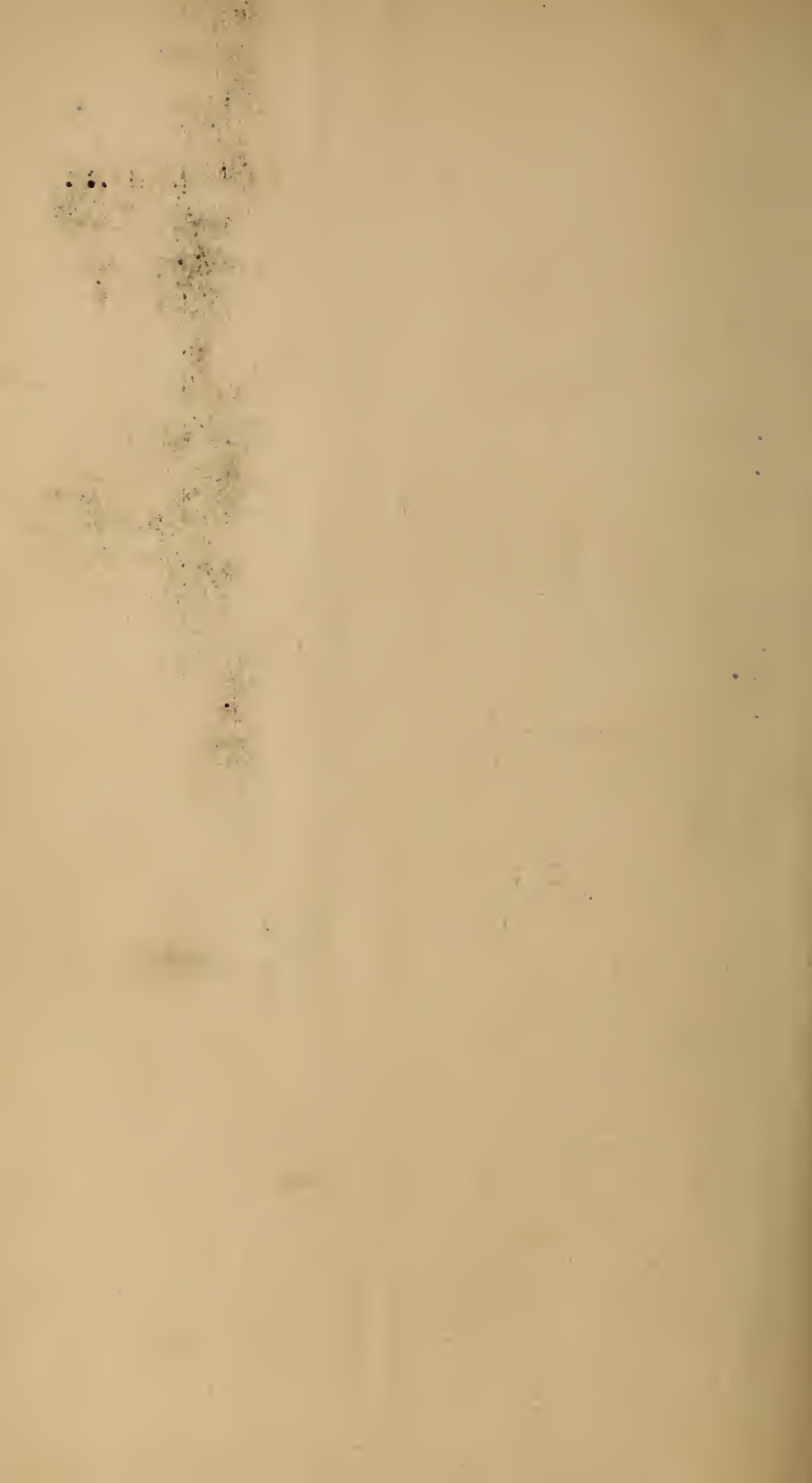
From this historical sketch, let us learn that the Church abides, though things change! “The School-house” has forsaken its old site and is transformed into the double dwelling-house. New voices lift with us the praiseful song; but the Church and Jesus are the same.

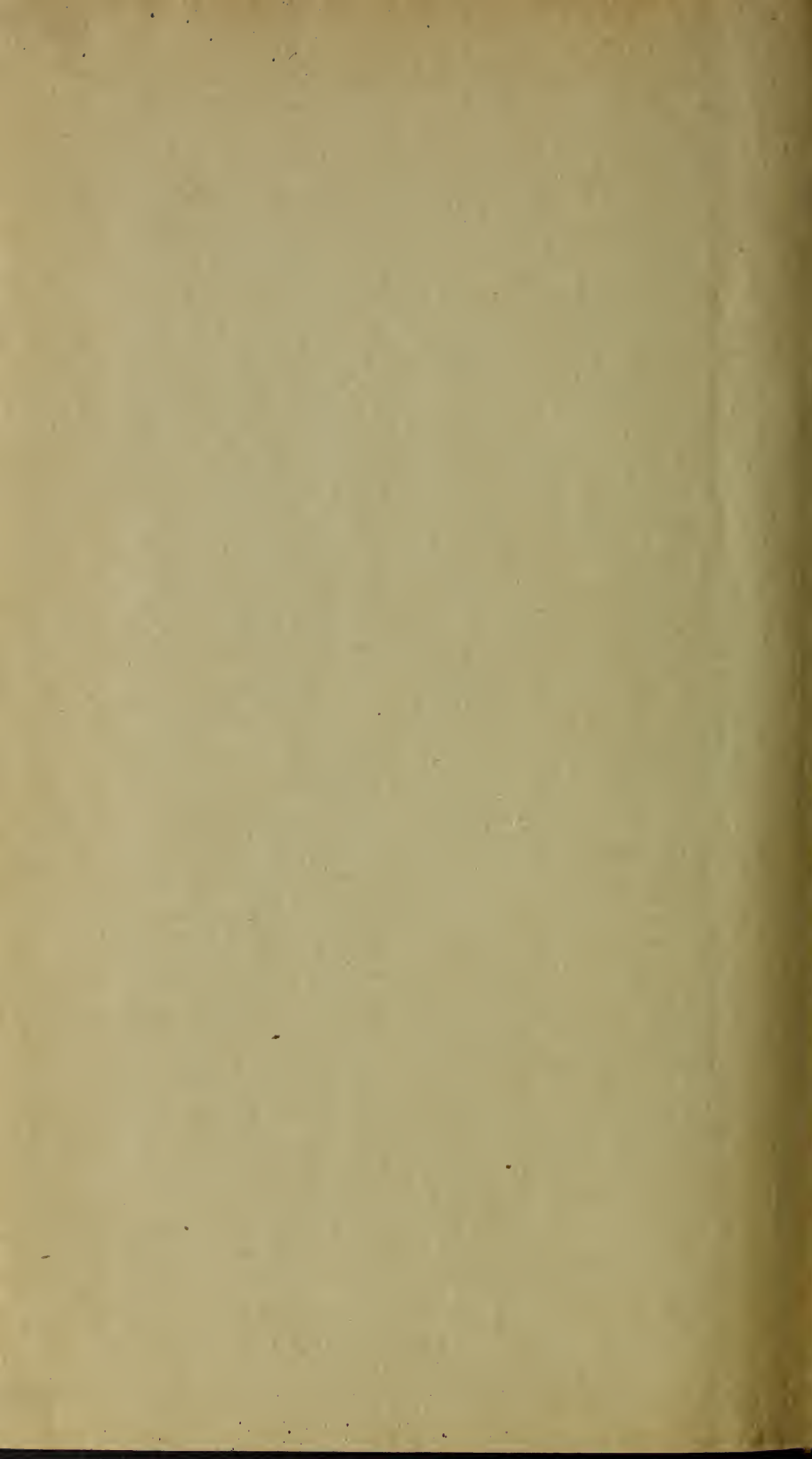
Let us learn never “to despise the day of small things!” No one conjectured, seven years ago, what a great work was being carried on. No one can ever forecast the recompense or results of labor with God.

Let us learn to depend upon God, wholly and

always! Our associated history, illustrating the text, proclaims His faithfulness. Then be it ours, henceforth, to obey and trust! Let us learn the power of Christian union, patience, zeal, and faith; and in entireness of spiritual consecration, go forward, "looking unto Jesus;" for "there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed." May we all practice these lessons of Divine Providence and Grace! And when seven years more have glided into the past, there will be a gladder, grander story to recite, than even that which is consummated to-day.







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